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Lowell

M A G A Z I N E

**What's Up With Enrollment?
It's Way Up!**

**Don LaTorre Asks:
'How Much Is Enough?'**

**For Kay Roberts,
Strings Are
the Thing**



Bringing Music to the People: Kay George Roberts, Ambassador with a Baton

by Geoffrey Douglas

Nashville was a segregated city in the 1950s, when Kay Roberts was a child there. And when a local elementary school teacher, a man named Robert Holmes, asked to teach stringed music in the city's public schools, the man in charge said no. "Blacks cannot learn to play string instruments," Holmes was told. And the matter should have been closed.

But Holmes saw it differently. "Give me the instruments and I'll try anyway," he told the music superintendent — then formed an all-black youth ensemble that he called the Cremona Strings (named for the small Italian city where, 500 years ago, the Stradivari family first made its violins) and began rehearsing his kids.

One of that group was the young Kay Roberts. And if you want to understand how the schoolgirl came to be the musician, conductor and educator she is today — and the tireless advocate for all things new and overlooked — there is probably no better place to begin.

"As an African-American woman, I am a minority within a minority," says the UMass Lowell music professor, who came out of that experience nearly fifty years ago as a violinist in the Nashville Youth Symphony — and not long after, still a senior in high school, as the youngest member of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra — before winning a scholarship to Tanglewood, then admission to the Yale school of music, where she would be the first woman, black or white, to earn her doctorate in conducting.



"Without that early exposure, I never would have pursued a music career. You have to fight the isolation black classical musicians face, once they enter the mostly white world of symphony orchestras."

She has been fighting that isolation ever since, not only for herself but for others. Today, as founder and director of an orchestra whose mission is to link cultures through music – bringing to Lowell one opera that memorializes Cambodian oppression and another that fuses African drumming with jazz and gospel styles – and of a community-outreach program that offers stringed-instrument lessons to public-school kids, she has been championing overlooked causes almost since the days when she was part of one herself.

"Kay Roberts has dedicated her career to advocating for the under-represented and overlooked in society, promoting music education for children and using music as a bridge to connect cultures," UMass President Jack Wilson said last April in announcing his choice of Roberts as one of six winners of the 2007 President's Award for Public Service. "She utilizes her love of music to reach out to the community." And, he might just as easily have said, to the world.

But it all began in 1950s Nashville – though not the same Nashville most other black Tennesseans would remember from that time:

"I grew up on the campus of Fisk University. My father founded the Psychology Department there; my mother was a professor of library science. Next door to us lived poets, writers, painters, musicians. It was an intellectual and cultural oasis."

There was music all around, she remembers: in her home, where her mother played the piano, and at the university, where the family often attended local concerts. From the time she began taking violin lessons, with Robert Holmes in elementary school, it was clear she had an extraordinary talent. By junior high school, she had been chosen to play in the city's just-segregated Youth Symphony; its conductor, Thor Johnson, the internationally known and widely loved former director of the



Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, became an early mentor, choosing her to play, as the youngest-ever member, in the Nashville Symphony, then later to tour the U.S. as a member of the World Symphony Orchestra, made up of 140 musicians from around the globe.

She had a way of attracting world-renowned mentors. Several years later, in the summer between her sophomore and junior years at Fisk, as winner of a violin fellowship at Tanglewood, she worked for a time under Leonard Bernstein, who persuaded her to change her major from mathematics to music. And three years after that, by now a student at the Yale School of Music, she came under the tutelage of master conductor Otto-Werner Mueller, who recognized her talents in conducting — as well as with the violin — and not long after, arranged for her to lead rehearsal performances of both the Nashville and Atlanta Symphony Orchestras. In addition to Bernstein and Mueller, she also worked or studied along the way with international conducting icons – and teachers – Seiji Ozawa, Andre Previn, Sir John Eliot Gardiner and Gustav Meier. Her professional debut as a conductor came, fittingly, with her hometown orchestra, the Nashville Symphony, in 1976.

Since that time she has conducted all over the U.S. and the world: the Cleveland Orchestra, the Chicago, Dallas, Detroit and Nashville Symphony Orchestras, the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra and the Orchestra Svizzera Italiana. In 2004, she served as co-conductor for the acclaimed Sphinx Inaugural Gala Concert in

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Carnegie Hall. She is also the principal conductor for Opera North in Philadelphia, an African-American company of musicians who, for more than thirty years, have been bringing opera to the public and parochial schools of inner-city Philadelphia.

During most of this time — since 1978 — she has been a member of the music faculty at UMass Lowell. And for all her concert and conducting successes, it has been in this role, as a teacher and member of the Lowell community, that she has made her most remarkable, and most enduring, contributions.

Through most of her early years at the University, her time was divided between teaching and travel, as the demands of her conducting duties took her to points all over the globe. “I had been guest-conducting major orchestras, which was extremely rewarding,” she says. “But I was on the road a lot, and a decision needed to be made. I wanted to get more involved in the Lowell community.”

In 2001, she founded the UMass Lowell String Project, which some would say has been her trademark achievement. An after-school training programs for inner-city schoolchildren, it offers stringed-instrument lessons under the guidance of a master teacher – adjunct faculty member and alumna Susan Turcotte Gavriel '75, as well as UMass Lowell string students as apprentice teachers – to



Lowell public school students from third grade through high school. The program was initially funded through grants from the American String Teachers Association and the Parker Foundation, with matching funds from the University and support from the city's schools.

Her motives for founding the program are deeply personal – rooted in memories of a segregated city and a long-ago teacher's vision and courage. The String Project could almost be said to be the legacy of Robert Holmes.

“I founded it, as a community outreach program for children in Lowell, because I experienced first-hand how important early exposure to music can be for a child,” says Roberts. “Our budget is very modest, with many in-kind services. But the master teacher, the student teachers and guest teachers still need to be paid, and the rental for the kids' instruments is costly. Funding is a major priority for me – because it's just so very worthwhile. Over the past eight years, almost a thousand Lowell public school students, some from the city's most underserved neighborhoods, have learned to play a stringed instrument. Their joy of making music is absolutely contagious.”

The String Project, though, was only the beginning. Three years later, she founded the New England Orchestra (NEO), also based in Lowell, a professional chamber orchestra whose goal is to reflect the city's diversity, linking its various cultures through the medium of music. In the early fall of 2007, NEO performed a concert in the Merri-mack Repertory Theatre as part of a month-long “On the Road in Lowell” tribute to Jack Kerouac. Last year, on the occasion of the UMass Lowell Peace and Conflict Institute's (PACSI's) annual Day Without Violence, it put on a concert to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the death of



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Martin Luther King—this time, for the first time ever, with a side-by-side performance from Kay Roberts’ String Project students.

“We intend to nurture a new generation of concert goers with the discovery of the joy of music, and the young talent representing the next generation of artists,” Roberts told reporters at the time.

Just a few months before the Kerouac event, in the spring of 2007, Roberts put together a very different kind of tribute – similar only in that, like all her signature work, its focus remained on the fusing of musical cultures.

She had been searching for some time for a work by a Cambodian composer that might reach out to Lowell’s vast Cambodian population – the second-largest in the U.S. She found it in “Where Elephants Weep,” a love-story opera by composer Him Sophy, that tells the story of Sam, a Cambodian-American who gives up his life in the U.S. to return to his native country, where he joins the monkhood in Phnom Penh, then falls in love with a Cambodian karaoke star. Based loosely on an old Khmer legend, it blends traditional Cambodian and Western music in a mix that calls on every style and genre from ancient Khmer lullabies to operatic arias and the sounds of cellphone rings. After traveling to Cambodia to conduct a workshop presentation of the opera in Phnom Penh, she was instrumental in

Benefit Concert to be Held in May

On Sunday, May 17, in line with her credo, “Making Music, Building Bridges, Engaging Communities,” Kay Roberts is launching Lowell’s first Youth Orchestra in a benefit concert at Durgin Concert Hall on South Campus.

The concert will feature guest artist, violinist Jesús Florido, a talented musician trained in the classical tradition. As a founding member of the National System of Youth and Children Orchestras – El Sistema – in his native Venezuela, Florido, who is also a long-time teacher, will be a particularly well-suited presence to a youth orchestra, Roberts says.

The concert will take place at 3 p.m. Donations, at the door, will be \$20 for adults, \$10 for seniors.





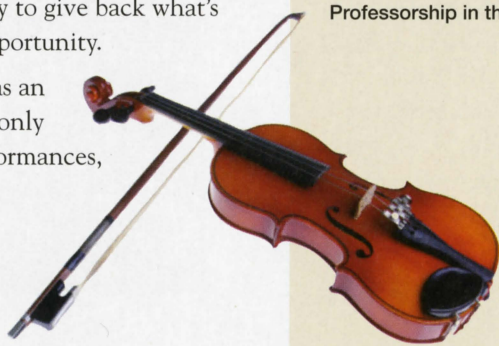
fusing together what the International Herald-Tribune later called “an unprecedented private-public partnership” to bring it to Lowell – where it rehearsed in the Lowell High School auditorium, to “roars of appreciation,” before making its debut, in April 2007, at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium.

“I can’t judge the importance of ‘Where Elephants Weep’ for a U.S. audience,” Kay Roberts says. “What I do know is that the production of this opera in Lowell brought the cultural community together, and that its performance here had the most diverse audience any event in Lowell has ever seen.”

In the end, though, she will tell you, she is a teacher. But the teaching doesn’t end in the classroom. And her students aren’t the only ones who learn.

“When I came to UMass Lowell thirty years ago, I experienced the University as an encouraging environment that stimulated my creativity and challenged my abilities. Inside the UMass Lowell community, the question seems to be how education can create a whole person – not only to open doors to a profession, but also to stimulate growth throughout the person’s life. Teaching here gives me the chance to share this attitude with my students, as well as to reach out to the Lowell community to give back what’s been given to me – education and opportunity.

“I think of the role of a conductor as an educator, in the broadest sense. Not only with musicians in rehearsals and performances, but in enhancing the audience’s understanding of what they will be hearing and seeing.”



Kay Roberts Named First Recipient of Donahue Professorship

Prof. Kay Roberts has been named the first recipient of the Nancy Donahue Endowed Professorship in the Arts, the first professorship in the arts at UMass Lowell.

A gift from the Richard K. and Nancy L. Donahue Charitable Foundation of Lowell, the professorship will strengthen the music, art and theater programs at UMass Lowell by expanding the University’s relations with local music, arts and theater communities.

The professorship was announced at the University’s Sounds of Spring Concert in April, at which Mrs. Donahue said, “I can not think of a better ambassador for this professorship (than Prof. Roberts). Her passion for teaching, the city of Lowell and her music is well known and very much appreciated.”

Roberts said, “I am very honored to be the first recipient of the Nancy Donahue Professorship of the Arts. To make a difference in the lives of others and to bring music to the Lowell community has been a wonderful experience for me.”



Prof. Roberts greets Nancy Donahue at the University’s Sounds of Spring Concert, during which it was announced that Roberts has been named the first recipient of the Nancy Donahue Endowed Professorship in the Arts.